

Dear SOMHELP Members,

This week I am sharing a timely topic: **Stress Management**. The holidays are getting geared up, so please be aware of the following tips on managing stress.

How stress can harm you

Occasional stress is a natural part of life. However, when it gets out of control, it can become very harmful. Often, a build-up of stress involves a problem that stays with you for months, or even years. Financial pressure is a prime example. Stress can be cumulative, so it's often not just one problem, but many small problems that build up. As the stress persists and is not relieved, it begins to take its toll on:

- 1) **Your health** When you 'gear up' under stress, your body begins to do more of some things and less of others. For example, blood circulation increases, but digestion slows down or even stops. Once the stress ends, your body goes to work to restore the balance. However, if stress returns too soon, your body will never have time to get back on an even keel. Eventually, this can lead to major health problems. Some, like heart disease and ulcers, can put you in the hospital. Others (sleeplessness, headaches, poor digestion) are less acute, but still serious.
- 2) **Your relations with other people** Under stress, most people become so wrapped up in their own problems that they forget about everyone else. At the same time, they begin to take out their feelings on family and friends. The result can be bad feelings between family members, along with the loss of friends. As well, stress quickly becomes a family problem, not just your own.
- 3) **Your efficiency in your work** For a short time, stress can make you a better, more efficient worker. However, over the long haul, it will gradually wear you down. You will become physically weaker and begin to tire easily. At the same time, you will find it difficult to concentrate and will begin to make poor management decisions. Because of weariness and lack of concentration, you also will become much more accident-prone.
- 4) **More stress** Stress will have a snowballing effect, because all of the problems it causes -- health, family, and work - will become new troubles (stress) in your life.

Learn to handle stress

Once you understand how stress is affecting you, you can begin to bring it under control. This will be a gradual process because, for the most part, it involves learning good habits and forgetting bad ones.

- 1) **Talking** about your problems is one good way of relieving stress. Choose someone you can be open with, and tell him or her about your problem(s). If there is no one close you feel you can talk to, consider someone like a clergyman, family doctor, or take advantage of your Employee Assistance Program free counseling sessions (call 866-750-0512).

2) Learn to **recognize when you are coming under stress**. Everyone has a definite physical response, but it varies from person to person. In one, it might be tightening of the neck or shoulder muscles; in another, queasiness; in yet another, frowning. Try to respond to your stress signals by concentrating on something other than the problem - for example, taking a deep breath or deliberately relaxing your muscles - will often help.

3) When you feel under stress, **evaluate the cause**. Is it something minor, or something you have no ability to control? If so, is the stress actually causing you more harm than the problem itself? See number 2 above.

4) When dealing with a major problem, try to **break it down** into smaller parts. For example, if you have a barn that needs a lot of repairs, pick out one job and concentrate on getting it done. Once that task is completed, pick out another, and so on. Gradually, the problem as a whole will begin to seem more manageable.

5) **Schedule your time realistically**. Don't try to squeeze more work into a day than you can actually complete. Also, leave room for the unexpected. Usually, there will be something (for example, an unexpected visitor) that will hold up your work.

6) Take **short “reset” breaks** from your work. A person who works without breaks becomes steadily less effective during the course of the day. By contrast, a few minutes off (walking outside is a great option – a product like YakTraks can offer traction when it is slippery outside; or you might try “desk-ercise” – corny sounding, but actually quite nice, <http://uclivingwell.ucop.edu/deskercise/>) will refresh you and give you a new start at the job.

7) **Learn how to relax**. One way is to practice doing certain things slowly (eating or walking, for example). Another is to just sit back in a chair and concentrate on relaxing your muscles. If you find this difficult, try alternately tensing and relaxing, until you become familiar with the difference.

8) **Develop other interests** that will help you forget about your problems for a while. Sports work for some people; reading, exercising or socializing work for others.

Thank you to the Lewis & Clark County Wellness Program and Wendy Stewart for the excellent content of this message.

Information contained in the SOMHELP e-mails is general in nature, and not intended to diagnose, treat, cure, or prevent any disease. As always, you should consult with your healthcare provider before making any changes.

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